



## The Holiday Tree

I suppose I deserved it when the driver behind me laid on his horn. It wasn't just a friendly 'toot', the kind that reminds you to pay better attention to something or other. This was a long, angry blast, and it startled me. I pulled over and let the guy in a hurry be on his way. But not without a grumbled "Happy Holidays to you, too, buddy!"

I had gone down to that place of so many cars, most of which seem to me to be moving too quickly. The roads in the Twin Cities are just awful right now. They have far less snow on the ground than do we at home, but it has frozen into ice and there are hazards everywhere. I'm the sort that slows down for such things, in addition to the fact that it was dark out, and I wasn't quite sure where I was.

I had just left one daughter's place, having delivered several holiday centerpieces that she will be using at her wedding. Maggie's apartment was full of Christmas cheer, with a lovely, full tree lit up in the living room. I was on my way to the other daughter's place, by a route that was not yet familiar to me, to deliver an old table, some chairs, and a couch. I suppose it doesn't help that I am distracted by such things, but I am a sucker for trees and holiday lights, and you can sure find a lot of them in the Cities. So I guess it was my own fault that the guy behind me turned into a Scrooge.

In the midst of studying for some difficult college finals and barely moved into her new apartment, my youngest daughter had a string of lights up, but no room for a tree, and a cat that would be determined to climb one if she had it. For her I found two tiny artificial trees that would fit on top of her bookcase. These I decorated with tiny candy cane lights and little red and gold balls. They brought a cheery glow to the place, and the charm grew as we heard her upstairs neighbors caroling. You could feel their warmth, despite the walls separating us.

These girls grew up with Christmas trees cut near our home on the Chippewa National Forest. The choosing and cutting of a tree is an event that brought us together, young and old. I've never been real picky about my trees. For the screen porch I like a spruce, but in my house I prefer a simple balsam fir. I was happy with just about any tree the kids might choose. My mother-in-law, on the other hand, was a fine one for tree "shopping", as they called it. She would walk a long time in the woods, and when finally satisfied, one of her sons or grandsons would cut and haul the tree for her. With it there was always a winter picnic by a warm fire, and more than likely some teasing over someone else's scraggly tree or experiment in picnic food. In my box of family photos, you can trace the changes over the years from those picnics as the children grew up and the dogs grew old. One picture that resides on my refrigerator is of Bev with her grown sons. She loved the season, and shared it well.

A very special tree is going to come from the Chippewa in 2014, when we provide the Capitol Christmas Tree for Washington, D.C. Local schoolchildren have already begun making the thousands of ornaments that will accompany it. The last such tree from the Chippewa was a 60-foot tall white spruce, provided in 1992. We have still some of the ornaments made from that effort. The paddles, pine cones, canoes, orchids, black bears, eagles, and other ornaments reflect those that made them and where they live. They bear tags saying, *from Minnesota with love*.

Things have been so busy these days that I haven't gone looking for a tree yet, so my tree will go up late this year. I think I'll just call it a Holiday Tree, and leave it up longer. My hope is to get it up before Christmas, but if not, surely before New Year's. There's just something about the smell of the balsam, and the glow of the lights in winter that I find to be so magical that I simply can't skip this part of the holidays. Parked in front of such a tree, I find it a good place to count blessings during the long, cold nights of the northland. And so I'm never real eager to be done with such things.

One year my partner took up whining about how late I left up my tree, a white spruce that was rapidly losing its needles. So when he was not around, I replaced my spruce with a tamarack that I decorated with white lights and paper lace hearts. In time for Valentine's Day, the tamarack was fooled by the warmth of the house, and green needles burst forth from its buds. You could say it was unique.

My return trip back home from the Cities was a slow one, owing to a fresh snowfall. But by late afternoon I found myself on a familiar road near my home on the Forest. It was the sort of road that lends itself to poking along, my favorite pace, and the snowy landscape was breathtaking. An eagle flew over low, looking for yummy morsels of road kill. I waived at an oncoming school bus driver, a friendly, delightful woman whose easy laugh will brighten your day. There may have been another rig or two about, but there was no laying on of horns. I pulled into the driveway just in time to watch nature's light show fill the sky, as the sun set over the Chippewa.

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Photo by Terri Barrett